

# The Return of Historical Fiction

Mary Taylor Rycik, Brenda Rosler

In 2008, the Newbery Medal, Caldecott Medal, and Coretta Scott King Award-winning books were all historical fiction. In addition, three of the Newbery Honor books and two of the Caldecott Honor books were historical fiction or narrative biographies. One of the recently named 2009 Newbery Award Honor books combines both historical fiction and poetry (Engle, 2008). Historical fiction is back! Of course, this genre has always been a part of children's literature. Classic books such as *Johnny Tremain*, (Forbes, 1944), *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (O'Dell, 1961), and *Sarah, Plain and Tall* (MacLachlan, 1986) have always been included in the canon of great children's literature, but until recently fiction has dominated the Newbery Medal and Honor winners.

However, since 1986, 11 of the awards have been given to historical fiction books. Recent authors of historical fiction have perfected the art of combining an exciting story with memorable characters set against a backdrop of a historical time and place. *Elijah of Buxton* (Curtis, 2007) is the story of the first free-born child in a settlement of escaped slaves in Canada and how he learns the true value of his freedom. The book is not only a Coretta Scott King Award winner but also a Newbery Honor book. The 2008 Caldecott winner, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* (Selznick, 2007) is set in a Paris train station at the turn of the 20th century. Hugo is a 12-year-old orphan who, in the course of trying to uncover the secret of an automaton once belonging to his father, discovers the early history of filmmaking. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how high-quality historical fiction books can be used effectively in the classroom to not only bring history alive but also to help children appreciate the pleasure of reading this genre.

## The Values of Using Historical Fiction

Reading historical fiction provides students with a vicarious experience for places and people they could

otherwise never know. Often, they are able to see history through a child's point of view and identify with their emotions. They can experience the sadness Leah feels when she must sell her pony to provide money for her family during The Great Depression in *Leah's Pony* (Friedrich, 1998). They can sense the fear that Monique has when her family hides a girl pretending to be her sister from the Nazis in *The Butterfly* (Polacco, 2001). Historical fiction can also help students to gain an understanding of their own heritage and others. In *Virgie Goes to School With Us Boys* (Howard, 2005), students today can relive the exuberance of African American boys and girls who, after the Civil War, attend school for the first time. While reading *Esperanza Rising* (Ryan, 2000), children can understand the challenges of Latino and Hispanic immigrants from the past and the present. Good historical fiction creates an emotional connection between children of today and their historical counterparts.

Teachers are being encouraged to incorporate more informational trade books into their teaching as an alternative or supplement to textbooks. Many teachers, like fifth grade teacher Tonia Villano (2005), have found that their content area textbooks are too difficult for their students in terms of both reading level and concept load. She found that by using historical fiction picture books and poetry, her students had a much better understanding of life in different periods of history and geographic locations. Moss (2005) suggested using informational trade books to teach primary students content area literacy: "These books let children explore the real world through texts that are inviting, accurate, and accessible" (p. 51).

Terry Lindquist (2002), a fifth-grade teacher who has been recognized by the National Council for the Social Studies as "Elementary Teacher of the Year," has several reasons why she teaches with historical fiction: it piques kids' curiosity about historical events, provides them with everyday details that a textbook would miss, gives them multiple perspectives on events and helps students contemplate the

**Table 1**  
**Picture Books**

| Book   | Historical setting               | Synopsis   | Classroom application   | Paired nonfiction text   |
|--|----------------------------------|--|---|--|
| <i>Pilgrim Cat</i><br>(Peacock, 2004)  | Colonial America                 | A young Pilgrim girl discovers a cat on the Mayflower. They begin their life in the Plymouth settlement.   | Write a description of life in the Plymouth colony from the point of view of Pounce the cat.  | <i>Life in Colonial America</i><br>(Copeland, 2002)  |
| <i>The Blue and the Gray</i><br>(Bunting, 1996)                                  | Flashback to the U. S. Civil War | While an African American boy and his white friend watch the construction of a house on a U. S. Civil War battle site, they learn the history of the battle. | Create a Venn diagram contrasting life for the two boys now and what their lives would have been like during the U. S. Civil War.         | <i>For Home and Country: A Civil War Scrapbook</i><br>(Bolotin & Herb, 1995)                                   |
| <i>Grandfather's Journey</i><br>(Say, 1993)                                      | Emigration from Japan to America | A Japanese-American man recounts his grandfather's immigration and feelings on being torn between two countries.   | Perform a drama about immigrants arriving at Ellis Island. Students research their character and write their dialogues.                   | <i>Ellis Island</i><br>(Landau, 2008)  |
| <i>Across the Blue Pacific</i><br>(Borden, 2006)                                 | Flashback to World War II        | A woman reminisces about her neighbor's son who received letters from a fourth-grade class when he was at war in 1943.                                       | Create a timeline of events that occurred in the Pacific front during World War II. Write a letter to the fourth-grade class in the book. | <i>World War II for kids: A history with 21 activities</i><br>(Panchyk, 2002)                                  |
| <i>The Cats in Krasinski Square</i><br>(Hesse, 2004)                             | Warsaw, Poland 1942              | A young girl and her friends devise an ingenious plan to smuggle food into a Jewish ghetto.  | Create medals of courage for those that risk their lives to save others.  | <i>Ten Thousand Children</i><br>(Fox & Abraham-Podietz, 1999)  |
| <i>Players in Pigtails</i><br>(Corey, 2003)                                      | 1940s America                    | A girl tries out for a female professional baseball team.  | Write a persuasive letter to the 1940s sports editor explaining why girl's baseball should be covered.                                    | <i>A Whole New Ball Game: The Story of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League</i><br>(Macy, 1995) |
| <i>Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan</i><br>(Williams, 2005) | 1980s Sudan                      | During the Sudanese Civil War, refugees are forced to walk more than 1,000 miles to safety.  | Research the history of Sudan. Write a letter of advice for the boys when they arrive in America.   | <i>Sudan in Pictures</i><br>(DiPiazza, 2006)   |

**Table 2**  
**Novels**

| Book   | Historical setting            | Synopsis   | Classroom application  | Paired nonfiction text   |
|--|-------------------------------|--|--|--|
| <i>Good Master!, Sweet Ladies!: Voices From a Medieval Village</i> (Schlitz, 2008) | Medieval England              | 22 monologues describing life in an English village ranging from a lowly milkmaid to the son of a lord | Choose a character and research it. Perform Readers Theatre.   | <i>Life in a Medieval Village</i> (Gies, 1991)   |
| <i>Hard Gold: The Colorado Gold Rush of 1859</i> (Avi, 2008)                       | Gold Rush, 1859               | A young boy runs away from home, heads west to find gold and saves his family from ruin.               | Ask students to take on the role of a new character or existing character and improvise dialogue for a scene in the book.  | <i>Gold Fever! Tales From the California Gold Rush</i> (Schanzer, 2007)                |
| <i>Day of Tears</i> (Lester, 2005)   | Slavery, Georgia, 1859        | The author writes in dialogue to recreate an account of the largest slave auction in history.          | Pair students with a partner. Students choose a passage of text and discuss. One student reads the passage aloud and the partner shares the inner thoughts of the character. | <i>Slavery in America</i> (Schneider & Schneider, 2006)                                |
| <i>Out of the Dust</i> (Hesse, 1997)   | Great Depression              | A young girl endures dust storms and family tragedies in the Oklahoma dust bowl.                       | Create a local newspaper from 1935 with events from the book and history.  | <i>Children of the Great Depression</i> (Freedman, 2005)                               |
| <i>The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963</i> (Curtis, 2000)                            | 1963<br>Civil Rights Movement | A family travels to Birmingham and witnesses a tragic event in Civil Rights history.                   | Ask students to take on a role of one of the Watson family and create a diary of their trip.   | <i>Witnesses to Freedom: Young People Who Fought for Civil Rights</i> (Rochelle, 1997) |
| <i>Revolution Is Not a Dinner Party</i> (Campestrine, 2007)                        | 1972<br>China                 | The daughter of two doctors experiences oppressive changes in her life during the Chinese Revolution.  | Create a WebQuest to research the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Contrast it with the American Revolution.   | <i>The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History</i> (Clark, 2008)                        |

complexities of an issue. For example, Lindquist has her students create cost versus benefit lists of historical decisions, such as whether an American colonist should join the rebels or stay with the loyalists. This is an excellent example of using historical fiction to enhance social studies and literacy instruction.

### **Responding to Historical Fiction With Modern Technology**

Historical fiction provides an opportunity for children to make both an efferent and aesthetic response to literature (Rosenblatt, 1978). As Louise Rosenblatt pointed out, it is just as important for

students to emotionally respond to books as it is to learn from them. Fortunately, we can do both by using modern technology. For example, students can research the accuracy of a book by locating websites about the historical event. Students can also read historical fiction websites such as the one for the popular *American Girls* series at [www.americangirls.com](http://www.americangirls.com). They can write online diary entries, create historical room settings, and even make “word quilts” on [www.scholastic.com/dearamerica](http://www.scholastic.com/dearamerica) based on the *Dear America* historical fiction book series. Teachers can create WebQuests to lead students through an inquiry through the real events experienced by fictional characters. An excellent model can be found at [teacherweb.com/TX/OakHillElementary/ColonialAmericaWebquest/h2.stm](http://teacherweb.com/TX/OakHillElementary/ColonialAmericaWebquest/h2.stm).

SMART boards can be used to create timelines and Venn diagrams to connect students with historical events. Students could also create their own PowerPoint projects using digitized historical photos and other resources found at the Library of Congress website ([www.loc.gov/library/libarch-digital.html](http://www.loc.gov/library/libarch-digital.html)). Table 1 and Table 2 are resource guides for teachers of historical fiction picture books and novels, their historical settings and plot summary, possible classroom applications, and a nonfiction text on approximately the same level that could be paired with this book to do further research or response.

### The Importance of Historical Fiction

Goodlad (1984) describes classrooms where students work individually on assignments, listen to lectures in a whole-class setting, and spend too much time reading textbooks that are too difficult

(Chall & Conrad, 1991). Our classrooms need to become more engaging and student centered. Quality historical fiction can be used to teach history, but it can also help students connect with individuals who may have lived during these times. Welcome historical fiction back to your classroom.

### References

- Chall, J.S., & Conrad, S.S. (1991). *Should textbooks challenge students? The case for easier or harder textbooks*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Goodlad, J.I. (1984). *A place called school: Prospects for the future*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Lindquist, T. (2002). *Why & how I teach with historical fiction*. Available: [teacher.scholastic.com/lessonrepro/lessonplans/instructor/social1.htm](http://teacher.scholastic.com/lessonrepro/lessonplans/instructor/social1.htm)
- Moss, B. (2005). *Making a case and a place for effective content area literacy instruction in the elementary grades*. *The Reading Teacher*, 59(1), 46–55.
- Rosenblatt, L.M. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Villano, T.L. (2005). Should social studies textbooks become history? A look at alternative methods to activate schema in the intermediate classroom. *The Reading Teacher*, 59(2), 122–130. doi:10.1598/RT.59.2.2

Rycik teaches at Ashland University, Ashland, Ohio, USA; e-mail [mrycik@ashland.edu](mailto:mrycik@ashland.edu). Rosler also teaches at Ashland University; e-mail [broslar@ashland.edu](mailto:broslar@ashland.edu).



### Lesson Link

For a related lesson plan, visit [ReadWriteThink.org](http://ReadWriteThink.org) to find

► **Historical Fiction: Using Literature to Learn About the Civil War**